

Theater Is Inherently Religious - the Theater of Invisible Made Visible

John O'Boyle

September 1976

President of the D. C. Striders Track Club in Washington, D.C.



A religion or philosophy attempts to define man in relation to himself, his community, and the forces of the universe, such that they are. An actor communicates a selective display of man relating to these forces, his community and himself for an audience. This communion of portrayal-reaction-interaction called theater is inherently religious, the "Theater of Invisible Made Visible." But if all theater is religious, it is not necessarily holy.

In the few instances of history in which a "holy theater" occurred, the "communal moving" of theater extended its influence beyond the moment of the "playing" into the community life. For a period, the insight of the drama became a viable, central instrument of purgation as well as didacticism. The invisible was made visible and "dwelt amongst them." In *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook assures us that everyone "... all over the world will answer positively from their own experience that they have seen the face of the invisible through an experience on the stage that transcended their experience in life." However, only in certain brief periods of the history of theater has this "vision" been sustained long enough to become a period of holy theater.

Roots of Creativity

Man's creative impulse goes back to the very roots of his spiritual beginning. His creation took direction in the implements useful for his physical existence -- weapons, tools, and so forth -- and in the expression of his spiritual existence -- his religion and art at this point being one. In all of man's creative efforts, especially in his religious-artistic creation, he makes things in the image of himself. A section of bone or a piece of rock is altered from one physical shape to another, and in the process, it takes on an image of its creator's spirit. It may be whimsical or serious, but in some way it becomes an expression of a facet of its creator's feeling tempered by his reason. However, in man's religion (the creation of his own spirit), "... as theologians have long known and anthropologists have recently discovered, man does not make God in his image. Rather, he makes himself in the image of his God."

The theater, being a creation of man, is a reflection of his spirit in the process of being created in the image of his God. At times the ethos of the theater communion may not be explicitly theistic, but in all periods of "holy theater" it has been. In this most profound instance theater provides insight and growth for all involved. This is the religious impact of theater.

The roots of theater lie buried in religious ritual and for a long time the two were inseparable. Man has long sought to understand and cope with the world about him. Exploration of physical nature and laws lead to his logical scientific understanding. Exploration of the spiritual laws, of invisible nature, led to his religious and philosophical understanding. "Playing" is an instrument of self-expression and discovery, as seen in a child, for it frees one from the normal dimensions of the physical and allows him to emotionally explore his world of imagination and desire. Adult playing is an extension of this exploration as well as an attempt to create order and control in the world. When a community expresses this adult "play" together it becomes a rite. When some of the participants of the rite become spectators to it, the germ of theater cracks the seed and begins to take root.

Rituals Important

The concerns of early man were rudimentary, an individual could not survive the elements of the harsh

world about him; strength lay in the community or tribe. The tribe was concerned with self-preservation through adequate food supply, birth rate, and strength in battle. Early rites dealt with the "regions beyond experience" that threatened these. Knowledge was gained through exploration of creative intuitive impulse. But where logic left off and there was no defined path, rudimentary 'religion in the form of superstition took over. Lest we smile at this "primitivism" one need only consider a farmer whose crops repeatedly are bad. The primitive farmer would accuse "bad spirits" as the cause, or feel the gods were angry at him. The modern farmer, after exhausting his knowledge of hybrid seeds, planting cycles, fertilizers, sprays, and drainage, would attribute the land with "bad luck," and his attendance at church and prayer might increase substantially.

Early man discovered a force of good and evil in nature. The good was the mana, the vital, positive force in all things. The evil force was the taboo: the forbidden, the most threatening, the thing feared. The taboo seemed to be more dominant when compared to the mana. So the rituals had a double task -- not only to appeal to the good forces but not to violate or offend the evil.

Up to this point theater and ritual were one. There was no delineation between art and religion for a long time following. The idea of art for art's sake may have held some ground during the decline of the Hellenic civilization when the essence had atrophied and only the form remained to be venerated, and probably in Roman culture as well. It has really been only since the Renaissance that art and religion gained such an artificial separation as occurs in most people's minds today. But early religion/art was still a community statement and a community property.

The Greek Ideal

As the civilization of Greece emerged from the "barbarians" which surrounded it, an amazingly sophisticated culture developed -- even by present standards -- and the first chapter of "holy theater" was opened. The original Hellenes were a tribe particularly adept at conquering others. Through their feats they gained prestige and attracted surrounding tribes to follow and imitate them. They all began to call themselves by the common name. Over a period of time these tribes learned a common language and intermixed. The cohesive factor came not so much from the common pedigree but rather that they all aspired to an ideal of what a true Hellene should be.

The festivals of the communities took on a profound significance, for they gave visible expression to the ideals of the city-state. They were times of a creative, religious experience among the whole community, and the impact is hard to visualize now. If man "creates himself in the image of his gods," then religion should be creative, fulfilled in creativity and self-discovery, and most profoundly fulfilled in communal creativity.

At its height the Greek theater provided a forum for this communal discovery, and the Greek society was free enough that the exploration could form a continuum with daily living. The religious-artistic expression was one of human intelligence, reason, and order. When tragedy evolved through the consecutive "creative leaps" of Thespis and Aeschylus, a matrix for a much more profound and sophisticated "communal moving" took form. Using myth and allegory, man could study his plight in relation to the gods.

Strong vestiges of rituals were retained in the use of masks, rhythmic movement, and music. Because the gods of the Greeks were not dogmatically defined, the treatment could be more creative. Murray, in *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, states, the "image carved by man was not the god, but only a symbol, to help towards conceiving the god... not the reality but only a symbol, to help towards creating the reality."

Aristotle felt that through the "pity and fear" of the tragedy, the corporate consciousness of the audience was purged and purified. In the process the entire community was challenged, educated and elevated (though Aristotle only noted change, not positive or negative). Rather than dictating edicts and supposed truths, the drama sought truth through symbols, allegories, and myths. And when the best minds seek for the truth, the result is apt to be beautiful.

Decline of Drama

When the idealism of the Hellenic culture eroded, the city-states began to decline. The form of the theater endured through the dictatorships, the wars, and the defeats, but the essence of the creative ceremony was lost and the first "holy theater" ended.

The play will "hold a mirror up to nature," even if the image is shallow. Roman drama faced a decaying cultural ethos and competition with visceral spectaculars was great. The theater that did exist satirized the evolving Christian rites of baptism, Eucharist, and so forth. And Christians were physically abused in plays and "specula." At one point fifty were crucified during a play whose script called for it.

Also, the actor lost the social respect of the society and attained even lower status as Christianity came to power. There was a gulf between theater and the church for a thousand years. This was unfortunate for both, for drama all but died out and had to be almost completely recreated, and the Church let what later proved to be an effective didactic tool lie fallow.

While the Church fathers attempted to suppress theater and the mimes, they concocted one of the most

elaborate "sacred dramas" ever -- the mass. Authorities on the subject all offer theories on to what degree the mass is a ritual or drama, or whether the two are mutually exclusive. If this is not the instigation of the next phase of "holy theater," at least it is a very powerful precursor. Pope Gregory presaged Peter Brook's modern definition of "holy theater" as Invisible-Made-Visible when he stated, "in the Mass one thing is made of visible and invisible." Amalarius more succinctly defined mass as "an elaborate drama with definite roles assigned to participants and a plot whose ultimate significance is nothing less than a renewal of the whole plan of redemption."

The Mass as Drama

O. Hardison, Jr. writes, in *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages*:

"Some events of the Mass are interpreted as moral lessons and some as re-enactments of Old Testament practices; some refer to the life of Christ and some have eschatological significance. Not infrequently, a single event bears two or more interpretations simultaneously. By the same token, the roles of the participants are fluid. At times the celebrant is the High Priest of the Temple sacrificing the holocaust on the Day of Atonement, at other times he is Christ, and at one point he is Nicodemus assisting Joseph of Arimathea at the entombment. The congregation can be Hebrews listening to the prophecies of the Messiah, the crowd witnessing the Crucifixion, the Gentiles to whom the word was given after it had been rejected by the Hebrews, and the elect mystically incorporated into the body of Christ."

Mass was a drama in its experience during the "dark ages." Beyond any value of relative aesthetics or appreciation, it had a profound affirmative effect on the community who shared in it and understood its symbolism. Only later were these things obscured as the "mysteries of the mass" truly became mysteries. The extent of the theatricality attained is in evidence from the many critical church documents which condemn "... the theatrical mannerisms and stage music... the vocal imitations of agonies of the dying and the suffering... the priests who contort the whole body with histrionic gestures." In this case the church vestments would then become sacred costumes, and the paten, the chalice, the candles, and so forth, would become sacred props. If one cannot accept the mass as a sacred drama, it should still be noted that "the celebration of Mass contains all elements necessary to secular performances. The Mass is the general case for Christian culture -- the archetype. Individual dramas are shaped in its mold."

The extension of the "symbolic drama" of the mass into the liturgical drama of the *Quem quaeritis* became the "bridge whereby medieval culture made the transition from ritual to representational drama", says Hardison. Most scholars attribute this point as the beginning of modern theater. It was also the genesis of a second period of "holy theater," more durable than the first, which flared and waned through the miracles and moralities and shone most brightly in Elizabethan theater, especially Shakespeare's.

Rebirth Themes

The Easter liturgy was an equally valid ritual expression of the same events as the mass; however, Easter had a common precedent with the spring renewal ceremonies, so the themes of life and rebirth were much more emphasized. When early Christianity encountered the Greek culture it adapted many of the elements to itself. It is interesting to see the "year-king" at the very core of Christian worship, and despite the theological implications, no one can deny the "year-king" myth as very ancient and universal. In Christianity this was refined to quite a sophisticated ritual. No longer did a living yearly sacrifice have to be made, for "Christ died for our sins," and by celebrating this event, the spring renewal was bloodlessly and mystically accomplished.

The element of time in the mass is the absolute presence, for the whole spectrum of history is allowed to occur almost simultaneously in its structure. The mass remained constant throughout the year, though the connotation changed according to the season. Christmas was a time of joy, passion week a time of sorrow, and Easter Sunday a day of celebration and uplift.

During the passion week "time" became linear as the Last Supper and other historical events of major proportion coincided with regular liturgical services of the church, producing a representational ceremony. There were many symbolic acts which followed the historical pattern of lent and these were most dramatically performed during the final days. On Maundy Thursday the altar lights were extinguished, the bells were used for the last time until Easter, the altar was stripped, the cross covered or removed, and the church was washed in preparation. On Good Friday the church stood desolate; the altar was bare, the images shrouded, the clergy dressed in black. Death is a universal and deeply felt phenomenon and the impact must have been great.

The Church amplified this ritual of resurrection with its rites of baptism. Baptism was allowed during only two seasons: Easter and Pentecost, with Easter being far more emphasized. There was a large proportion of adult baptisms at that time, and the initiation and ceremony were far more complex than today. Normally it took a minimum of three years to be baptized. The rites of baptism took place at a vigil mass Saturday night which usually ran into Sunday morning.

The dramatic baptism rite only more strongly underlined the drama of Easter Sunday, as the catechumens became living witnesses and expressions of the congregational purgation and cleansing through the Resurrection. On Easter Sunday the theme of sterility and death in the church was reversed, and the neophytes became infants "reborn from the emboldened womb." This must have been a tremendous

community ceremony.

The Quem quaeritis appeared about this time (religious dramas performed in the Church, usually at Easter, which depicted the angel appearing to Mary at the tomb, hence the term, which translates as "Where you going?") Later developments and changes of the liturgy, particularly in the displacement of the vigil sequence, left a vacuum which was filled by an expansion of the Quem quaeritis. The Quem quaeritis epitomized the event of the resurrection, a mythical event. It celebrates rebirth, not the more dramatic death of the passion, and displays the transition from guilt to innocence and from separatism to communalism. St. Augustine defined it as "ocular proof" of the miracle on which the entire fabric of Christianity depends.

Sacred History

By the tenth century the Quem quaeritis was liturgically independent. Its function was to present facts in as comprehensible a manner as possible. It was sacred history. In its freedom from ceremony, it could include more history than the original and introduce more representational elements such as costumes and realistic stage props. More than likely, the professional mimes were brought in to lend their dramatic talent to the effort.

The resurrection -- Quem quaeritis was the turning point of history. Rather than embellishing it, additional historic episodes were added -- all the way back to Adam and Eve, and all the way forward to the end of the world and final judgment. In this way the cycle form evolved, which reflects the somewhat "cyclic nature" of the mass. Beyond historical amplification, there was historical improvisation. Where minor instances were not known, liberal, often anachronistic elements were introduced. This produced a verisimilitude much more immediate than the ceremonial forms. Dialogue became a continuum and not a recitation. In these developments a fidelity to source was the prime concern and a conscious aesthetic effect was a minor concern. Religion and art had not yet separated.

As the Protestants gained power and churches in England, they looked on the cycles as a "Catholic device" and moved them out of the churches. At first they did not move too far, for they were presented on the church steps. The community sharing of the dramas increased as a vernacular tradition began, and townspeople replaced the clergy in more and more roles.

Scholars can identify few direct links between the Latin and vernacular dramas. The vernacular seems to have branched off and the two existed side by side for quite a while. It is felt that the vernacular dramas must have had a liturgical root, for they were too complex to spring full-blown into existence. But perhaps there was once again a great creative leap by a now anonymous author strongly influenced by the Latin dramas. The vernacular drama was consciously constructed in a representational mode. When the cycles developed and were often repeated, they began to take on almost the flavor of "Christian folk drama."

Mystery Cycles

As in church, "time" in the mystery cycles was the eternal present. The cycles "never lost touch with the sacramental character of its origin, but created a world which participated in eternity, a meeting place of God and man," says Anne Richter in *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*. The community was both the actors and the audience; their involvement with the play was immediate. There was a passionate identification with the characters, especially with Jesus. There is an account of how the soldier who spears Jesus on the cross became so engrossed in his role that he pushed the prop spear through the false bladder of blood into the side of the actor. About a half dozen actors died in this way.

Though violent at times, the audience did seem to achieve actual communion with the actor. The identity of the audience with their own part in the play was unquestionable; at times they were all of mankind, at times a specific group. Through these plays the community learned the Bible stories in a manner totally reflective of their own community. Good and evil were defined and delineated, and their position in the full scope of history gave them a universal reference.

The presentation and personification of good, evil -- the virtues and vices in the cycles led to a new form of drama, the morality. Again, this may have been another "great creative leap." The morality was more "protestant" in its form, so it fared well in the emerging society. The sacramental quality of the cycle was lost and the morality became more of an extended sermon, a fictional portrayal of doctrine. The perspective of the audience changed radically.

In the mystery the illusion was in one's own life and the reality was in the drama. In the morality the opposite was true. A barrier non-existent in the mystery cycle divided the play world from the place where the audience stood. As the scope narrowed in Tudor morality to one particular stage of life or one particular sin, the drama began to lose universal identity for the audience. Moralities became more concerned with the secular world, and their shape was often directed by commercial motivation. The hat that was passed often came back fuller when grotesques and monkeys were involved; but most especially when evil was cleverly displayed.

The new audience relation was confusing at first. They felt like strangers with no part to play. There is an account of a Play called *Thrie Estaitis* in which most of the actors preen, strut, and prate, seeming to be a

little miffed that the audience has intruded. A few of the kinder hearts among the characters clue the audience in on what is going on as the play progresses. The "theater of alienation" seems to have an early precursor.

An Apogee of Communication

By the time of the Elizabethan theater, most explicitly in Shakespeare's, the actor/audience relation had developed into an apogee of communication. Characters could directly address and include the spectator, could expose inner feelings through the soliloquy, or could retreat into the world of representation. The audience watched from three sides and shared the same daylight; yet in the world versus illusion, they could accept the imaginary environment of the play as reality. Shakespeare declared "all the world a stage, and all the men and women merely players." He backed up his idea by calling his theater "the Globe."

It was a most idealistic and expansive time in history. England ruled the seas and the "new world" had been discovered, new ideas were being postulated and the life focus of the Renaissance was riding the full swing. Shakespeare's plays presented a broad range of subjects, taught history, and presented and challenged kings as divinely appointed figures. He delved into the appearance of things versus their reality, the false versus the true.

The theater was once again a central focus in the common man's life, acting as an instrument of secular and spiritual learning in the richest sense, as a purgative, as an instrument for communal moving and defining. Shakespeare was also adept at exposing evil in some of his finest characterizations: Richard III, Henry VI, Iago, Shylock. This was a refinement of the appearance of evil in morality plays posing as virtue at first.

After a while illusion and reality were indistinguishable. The whole world was "theatricalized" as baroque forms smothered the Elizabethan and the significance and role of the theater diminished. Even before the Puritans closed down the theaters, the unique audience/actor communion of Shakespeare's time was dispersed. The remaining ties were sheared in 1642.

Since that time, despite some noble experiments and grand failures, another period of "holy theater" has failed to materialize. There have been "holy performances" and on occasion "holy productions" perhaps, but these have failed to ignite a sustaining "community-enlightening-purging-growing" such as previously defined. What often evolves instead is theorizing, sometimes beautiful theorizing, but theater occurs on stage in the audience/actor relationship, and not in abstract.

Friedrich Hebbel, with the experience of Goethe and Schiller behind him, wrote in his preface to Maria Magdalena, "... the function of drama, as the summit of all art, is to clarify the existing state of the world and man in its relationship to the Idea, that is, to the moral center which conditions all things, and which we must accept as existing.... The drama is possible only when in this state of affairs a decisive change takes place.... It must show how these elements, surging about confusedly and in reciprocal conflict, are begetting a new form of humanity in which all things will return to place, in which woman will once again stand face to face with man, as man stands face to face with society and society the Idea."

His countryman, Richard Wagner, created the first serious contender of "holy theater" since Shakespeare. Wagner instilled music at the core of the theater as the communicant of emotion and intuition, and he abandoned Christian forms in a return to Germanic myth. Francis Fergusson writes, "In the myth, human relations almost completely lose their conventional form, which is intelligible only to abstract reason; they show what is eternally human and eternally comprehensible in life and show it in that concrete form, exclusive of all imitation, which gives all true myths their individual character."

Modern Efforts

In England and America individual plays have been produced in the last fifty years which may have had a profound religious impact. But cohesive theater has yet to evolve from this. Elliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, often referred to as the "first great modern, religious drama," shows its protagonist preparing for martyrdom. However, he leaves little in sight for "we the living" if immolation is not our path to sainthood, and the play merely has a strange purgative and emotional power. Christopher Fry concocted dramas which could loosely be considered "religious," but his intellect often stumbles into the pathway of his emotion and blocks it. In MacLeish's *J.B.*, the drama shows a central figure who by the end of the play is resolved not so much to his God but more just "to continue." Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* is most affirmative that we will continue somehow, but the path is not clearly drawn. He seems to say with a smile the same thing MacLeish says with a grunt.

The modern French theater for a while took a number of passes at holy theater, perhaps as a result of the strong Catholic culture. Copeau's presentation of Obey's *Noah* was apparently moving and reverent. Some thought it simplistic and falsely naive. Copeau was accused of creating a religious theater for a select few. But *Noah* seems to be a legitimate allegory with roots in the medieval cycles. Unfortunately, the disease of dying Western civilization -- cynicism and disbelief invaded France after the Second World War, and though *Godot* may still be expected in some quarters, he does not show.

The Absurdist movement assures us he never will, which has produced a sort of "anti-holy" theater. When

Sartre talks of his experience in acting in a German prison camp it seems to jump out at first as something to think of, for he labeled it "... a great religious experience." But even Genet later views it as a very select experience for a very select group of people in a very select circumstance.

Passing note should be given to Russian theater. It seems at present that the actor and theater in Russia have a position and respect bequeathed in almost no other society. Because of the drabness and repression of the state, the people go to the theater "to live;" in many cases it is one of the few chances for emotional release and "feeling." But the genre of the new dramatists is restricted so that "new blood" is not being pumped in, and the society is closed so that whatever a person gains or learns in the theater has little chance to expand outside of it. In some ways the Russian "circumstance" is more ripe than any other country in the world for a "holy theater," but the "essence" has not yet been able to flourish.

It is interesting to include Brecht's theater at this point. Brecht's theory of alienation is an acceptable extension of Marxism into art, and Brecht created a pronounced style that is still greatly respected. He proposed replacing "sympathetic understanding with alienation as a cathartic or purgative device." Brecht's dramaturgy is excellent, especially when he has the sense to violate his own philosophies, and because of this, his theater works well. Yet despite its East German state support, Brecht's theater does not hold the impact in its own society a "holy theater" should. It is much more intriguing to West Germans and foreigners.

The experiments go on. Peter Brook feels that new approaches to the classics, to Shakespeare, is one possible path -- but only if the production is reinterpreted for its contemporary audience lest it "looks lively and colorful, there is music and everyone is all dressed up, just as they are supposed to be in the best of classical theater... and in our hearts we find it excruciatingly boring." His search for the "holy theater" goes on, as does Grotowski's.

Grotowski has stripped his theater of all extraneous elements to get to the core of his actor's spirit, and therein of theatrical expression. Artaud's vision of "theater of cruelty" is perhaps best encapsulated in a group called "The Living Theater" who seem to have entwined their own ethos and life-style with a theatrical expression. For a fee, an audience can watch. People come away deeply moved or deeply bored, often both. The group has not yet solved a sticky problem of the theater of cruelty -- what to do after "the moment of the scream"

History in the Making

The world has become for many people more cruel and alienating than anything the theater can concoct. The vivid violence and the news stories on television, and the movie camera, have supplanted most theatrical attempts at realism and cruelty. Football has become the triweekly purgative, and though there are still fading calls for revolutionary theater, the Marxist maxims have proven inept. The strands of the rope are entwined and frazzled, yet our capabilities, our desire, and our needs are waiting to be respliced.

Ugo Betti states, "... that theater today... which is history in the making... is in every respect truly theater, that is, actual collaboration between speakers and listeners in the common effort to formulate the dialogue of our epoch and to give expression to its aspirations. Religion and the theater has assumed in the conscience of many, a new importance precisely at a time when large areas of disbelief, or at least indifference, seem to spread both in the individual soul and into the world." It seems more than coincidence that in the times of holy theater there has been a close creative alliance between the two. A religious renewal in our world associated with a rebirth or restructuring of liturgy may prepare the way for new forms of a "holy theater" which are celebrational and proclamatory.

But will there be a third coming?